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The ideological dimension of aryanization politics in interwar Romania

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Abstract

The socio-political order emerging after World War I triggered some unprecedented radical phenomena which led to a genuine primacy of totalitarian ideologies in most European countries. Romania prematurely experiences the rising pressure of both internally and externally motivated political extremism. The democratic values were therefore altered and the multiethnic national profile became a major challenge, in terms of governance potential, for the political elites of that time.

This paper attempts to investigate and highlight the major role played by the Romanian integral nationalism in the process of shaping and implementing the so-called aryanization measures especially in the regions having a significant Jewish minority. Given the fact that such particular instances of Romanian anti-Semitism were insufficiently analyzed, both in Romanian and European historiography, it is scientifically relevant to properly investigate the emergence and development of aryanization by taking into account its regional manifestations.

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1. Introduction

Soon after the end of World War I, most of the young European nations experienced major socio-political imbalances. In Greater Romania the new societal realities based primarily on the existence of heterogeneous ethnic, cultural or confessional groups, each of them manifesting a distinctive way of internalizing the political values (and especially the political centralism) in the new nation state, became a major preoccupation for the political

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stakeholders. The latter needed all their know-how and political determination in order to ensure optimal governance suitable for satisfying most of community demands and expectations. Governing ethno-cultural heterogeneous societies always represented a major political challenge especially in the Eastern-European space. In Greater Romania there was a quite natural political tendency towards achieving a certain degree of societal homogeneity creating therefore the premises for an easy to conduct governance. Fostering the unity by limiting the existing diversity represented a political principle which can be perceived not only as an attempt to prepare the societal corpus for standardized state politics but also as an inherent instance of political centralism, a key-concept in the administrative architecture of most interwar nation-states. Usually a young nation-state is eager to achieve and ensure its internal legitimacy. This can only be done by creating a strong bond between society and political sphere. Gaining the social support and therefore the loyalty of all national groups, regardless of their ethno-cultural profile, represents a precondition for ensuring that sense of community which makes the idea of internalized citizenship possible and consolidates the state legitimacy. In Greater Romania, the rise of integral nationalism and consequently the anti-Semitic attitudes can be seen as direct results of inconsistent political representation of minorities, altered democratic values or ideologically motivated xenophobia. All these undesirable factors are linked to the incapacity of political stakeholders and therefore of the Romanian state to rapidly achieve an extended legitimacy and to create the necessary societal cohesion. Plural societies need a constant degree of political representation and act commonly against any form of centralism.

In order to explain the rising Romanian anti-Semitism, two main approaches are needed. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the internal social and political imbalances, determined a radical reset of various intra-societal relations. Consequently the politically instrumentalized national identity became exclusivist instead of being integrative and suitable for an authentic multiculturalism. As a direct result xenophobic attitudes became observable in everyday life. This first step towards political and social extremism is called “banal nationalism” (1) due to its benign, non-programmatic character. On the other hand, some roots of anti-Semitism in Greater Romania can be also identified in Europe’s interwar geopolitical architecture. The European postwar political order soon became the breeding ground for widespread extremism which culminated in the supremacy of the two main totalitarian regimes of 20th century: the German National Socialism and the soviet communism.

The colliding geopolitical interest of these totalitarian twins also affected Romania which rapidly became an ideological and propaganda battlefield. In many parts of the country (especially the ones inhabited by ethnic Germans) the geopolitical pressure of National Socialism became obvious. Besides many other systemic problems (such as the economic imbalances or the parliamentary crisis) various social categories manifested their dissatisfaction with politics and state centralism by embracing radical ideologies. Anti-Semitism became therefore widely spread not only at social level but also in the public administration and other various institutions.

In this particular historical context a new form of anti-Semitic manifestations emerged and gained significant relevancy in Europe’s political, economic and social sphere. It was called aryanization and it simply represented the broad scale implementation of national socialist ideological principles regarding race. The main goal of aryanization was to eliminate ethno-cultural undesirable categories (primarily Jews) from the economic system by transferring mobile and non-mobile Jewish capital into so-called Arian (non-Jewish) hands (2). Aryanization measures were conducted predominantly in the Third Reich under strict supervision of Nazi officials. Many allied states (among them Romania) adopted similar measures and decided to officially put them into practice by creating a necessary legislative framework. In Greater Romania the reasons for implementing the aryanization principles were geopolitically determined although the homegrown anti-Semitism was also a decisive secondary factor. Nevertheless most instances of the Romanian aryanization (which can also be called romanianization due to its obvious character and finality) were right from the start geopolitically determined. The Nazi political stakeholders carefully tried to bring the Romanian economic system under German control by fostering ideologically motivated principles such as the aryanization. Likewise, they intended to create an integrated European economic system, ensuring therefore the political and economic supremacy of the Third Reich in Europe. According to the former National Socialist Minister for Economic Affairs, Walther Funk (the mastermind of the so-called “Funk Plan”) the new European order was intended to guarantee a real independence of an integrated European economic space in comparison to other powerful economic centers such as the American one. The promoters of the “Funk Plan” assumed that “instead of the existent national autarkies a genuine European autarky should be established” (3) strengthening therefore Europe’s economic system.

2. Instances of aryanization

The implementation of aryanization measures across Romania was made possible by specially assigned laws issued by the Romanian authorities. The official goal of these regulations was, as mentioned previously, to ensure that only ideologically desirable social categories are allowed to possess any kind of assets or industrial capital. Some of the legislative acts designated to facilitate the aryanization process, can be described as follows (4):

- The so-called “Jewish status” published in the Romanian Official Gazette, nr. 183, on August 9, 1940. This law stipulated that all Jewish properties can only be sold to Romanian ethnics.
- The law concerning the confiscation of Jewish assets (published in the Romanian Official Gazette nr. 233, on October 5, 1940).
- The decree concerning a 25% reduction of trading fees, when the Jewish properties are sold exclusively to ethnic Romanians. This decree was published in the Official Gazette no. 10 of January 13, 1941.
- The law on protection of national interest, published in the Romanian Official Gazette no. 31 of 6 February 1941. The law prescribed that all penalties for ethnic non-Romanians (especially Jews) should be doubled if their actions were considered to be directed against the national interest and security.
- The special law, published in the Romanian Official Gazette no. 199 of 23 August 1941, according to which Aryanization credits (granted for the romanianization of industry and trade) were to be granted for a period of 10 years at an interest rate of only 3%.

In Greater Romania, there were also specialized institutions or institutional branches which carefully supervised an extensive implementation of aryanization. Among them the Romanian National Bank played a decisive role. According to some reports issued by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Auswärtiges Amt*) the National Bank of Romania offered financial assistance for aryanization supporting therefore anti-Semitic measures. As an example, between September 6, 1940 and December 31, 1940 (only a 4-month period), the National Bank of Romania (N.B.R.) has granted loans for the Romanization of industry and trade, estimated to be at about 27,106,696,250 lei (5). The attempts of Romanian authorities to establish an aryanized economic system represent a clear example of an extensive ideological instrumentalization of legislation and political decisions. On the one hand the roots of Romanian homegrown anti-Semitism were undoubtedly related to the idea of integral (i.e. ethnic) nationalism, but, on the other, there were significant external determinant factors which contributed to the emergence of aryanization.

Many high ranking Nazi officials were concerned about the implementation of aryanization in Romania mainly because they suspected it won't be properly carried out. According to a memorandum issued by the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (VoMi) [Main Welfare Office for Ethnic Germans] and addressed directly to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler on August 3, 1942, there were major concerns about the effects of aryanization in Romania, because they considered it a faked process without any major consequences for the Jews: “(...) In reality they only changed the company name while behind the Romanian marionette, the Jews could continue their businesses”[t.n.](6). The Third Reich was directly interested in the confiscated/transferred Jewish capital because it needed as much resources as possible for the war campaigns. Nazi officials used their power and influence to negotiate with the Romanian government the highest possible aryanization shares. The logic behind those arguments was that the ethnic Germans from Romania (mostly Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians) are also entitled to get a part of the aryanized Jewish capital, according to their demographic proportion in a certain region. Nazi Germany used the German Ethnic Group in Romania (*Deutsche Volksgruppe in Rumänien* – DViR) as an official instrument to persuade Antonescu and his supporters to accept the transfer of Jewish capital not only into Romanian but also into German hands. The German Ethnic Group in Romania (DViR) was declared by Ion Antonescu as a subject of public law on November 20, 1940 (7) and functioned as a genuine *status in statu* (8) having and extensive autonomy within the Romanian state. Eventually Bucharest and Berlin agreed that no aryanization share should be fewer than 3% for the Germans (9).

The instances of aryanization in Greater Romania reveal an ideologically and geopolitically motivated cooperation between Romanians and Germans. Their complicity became official and institutionalized after the outbreak of World War II, if taken into consideration that aryanization measures (perceived as a distinctive form of anti-Semitism) gained a legislative dimension. As mentioned above there were some assiduously negotiated shares of the transferred Jewish capital. According to the official reports found in the Political Archive of the German

Federal Foreign Office (Das Politische Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts), the aryanization shares in some important areas from Banat and Transylvania can be presented as follows:

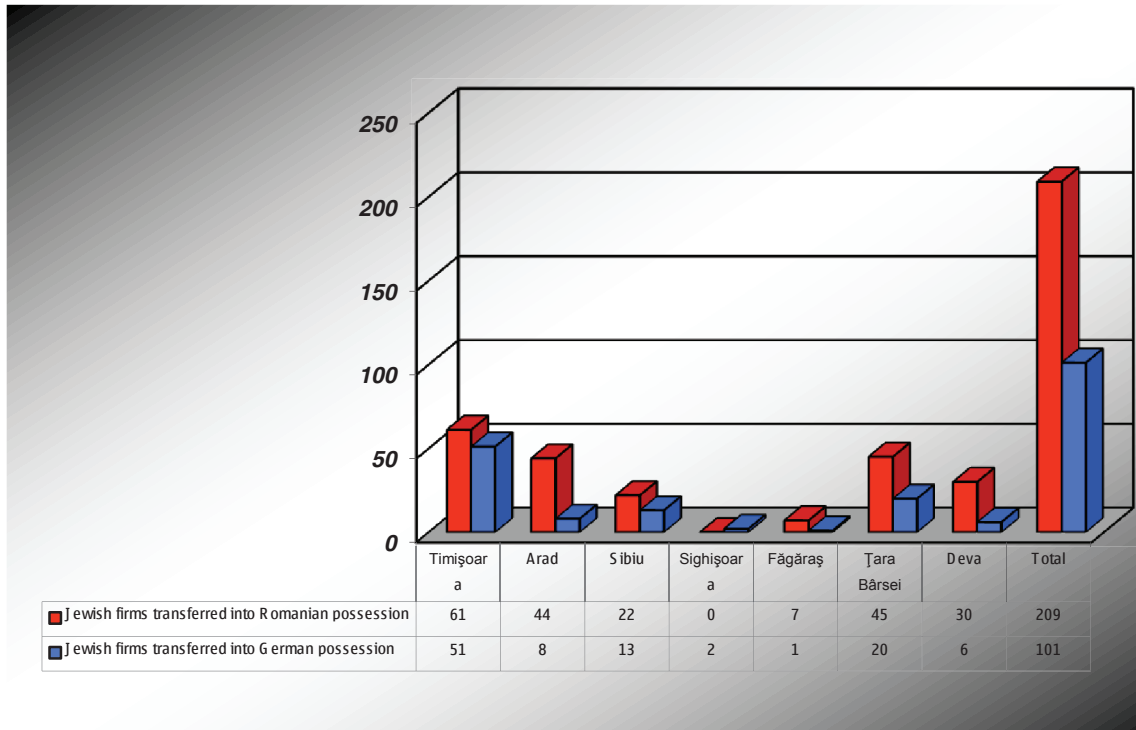


Fig.1. The aryanization of Jewish firms in Banat and Transylvania (1940-1941). Source: PA AA, Inland II D, R 100543, 000054, Romanisierungstendenzen. Aktenvermerk über die Arisierungspolitik der rumänischen Regierung seit September 1940, unpagged.

The schema presented above highlights and summarizes the recorded official data about aryanization measures implemented by the Romanian government since September 1940. It is obvious that most beneficiaries of aryanized Jewish capital were Romanian ethnics. However the significant German capital shares, despite being fewer in comparison to the Romanian ones, demonstrate without any major doubts, a gradually succeeded Nazi involvement in the process of planning and carrying out aryanization politics in Greater Romania.

3. Conclusions

Politics and society in the 20th century were profoundly marked by extreme ideological phenomena. The emergence and development of both communism and National Socialism were strongly interlinked especially at the level of propagandistic justification of various practices and attitudes. The Romanian aryanization politics represent a particular instance of an ideologically constructed pan-European anti-Semitism even if their impact was in many cases regional. There was an essentially homegrown Romanian integral nationalism which triggered a major readjustment of various societal relations but the predispositions towards political and social extremism had already in the early stages, a systemic character. The Romanian aryanization politics adopted many features of German anti-Semitism as a result of an increased geopolitical pressure of the Third Reich. However strategic political decisions concerning the aryanization of Jewish capital in Romania were not always and not necessarily made by Nazi officials, but also by the Romanian authorities (10). As previously highlighted, the laws issued by executive stakeholders or the direct implication of important institutions (such as the Romanian National Bank) demonstrate

Romania's assumed complicity and its willingness to undertake radical measures against innocent citizens based solely on the fact that they became ideologically undesirable.

Perceived as a particular form of anti-Semitism, aryanization reveals itself as a multifaceted phenomenon. It was primarily based on the primacy of extremist ideologies in interwar Europe and distinctively reflected, especially in the early stages, social habits and attitudes which can be defined as diffuse (banal) nationalism. Likewise, aryanization has to be analyzed in a broader context of emerging European nation states after World War I. The case of Greater Romania reveals most of the imbalances that are representative for a young nation state: parliamentary crisis followed by a long term deterioration of the entire political stage, inappropriate political attitudes towards ethno-cultural minorities - and most importantly, no officially assumed minority law (11) - or obvious predispositions towards state centralism contrary to many expectations of a multicultural society. All these factors represent a distinct indicator for the incapacity of the young Romanian state to optimally face the political and social challenges in the new established European post-war order. The leading Romanian political elites were not able to avoid the traps of integral nationalism mainly because they insufficiently promoted the idea of pluralism and failed to gain the loyalty of all Romanian citizens regardless of their ethno-cultural origin. This was one of the most important causes of instability in the interwar period and simultaneously the breeding ground for political extremism. Particular instances of the Romanian anti-Semitism, such as aryanization, remain even nowadays insufficiently investigated and constitute therefore a major historiographical challenge.

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